

VZCZCXRO2094
PP RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHIHL RUEHKUK
DE RUEHGB #1586 1441424
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 231424Z MAY 08
FM AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7498
INFO RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L BAGHDAD 001586

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/23/2018

TAGS: PGOV IR

SUBJECT: PRT WASIT: GOVERNOR'S AIDE HINTS AT LARGER U.S. ROLE IN ELECTIONS

Classified By: Acting Team Leader Rob Jones for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

.

¶1. (U) This is a PRT Wasit reporting cable.

¶2. (C) Summary. On May 22, PRT met with the director of the Governor's Management Office, Hajji Kareem Yusif Shenein, to discuss provincial elections. Kareem suggested the possibility that the marja'iyya might guide voters if they "see that the people are confused"; dismissed forecasts of Sadrists gains in provincial elections; reported that "all the parties" are creating independent "shell" parties that will run as independents but which will act in league with them; and hinted at a larger U.S. role in Wasit elections. End Summary.

¶3. (C) Hajji Kareem, who acts as a kind of Chief of Staff to Governor Latif Hamid Turfah, helped assemble the List 221 slate (Gathering of Iraqi Elites) that swept Wasit's provincial elections in 2005. Kareem also leads Wasit's branch of the Independent Gathering (Qutl al Mustakaleen). In 2005, List 221 claimed 31 of Wasit Provincial Council's 41 members, including the Governor and PC Chair Mohammed Hassan Jabir. While he professed agnosticism as to the likely role of religious authorities in the 2008 elections, he did offer that the marja'iyya "will only support coalitions that include the different groups from within Iraq. Until now, there is no indication that the marja'iyya are going to get involved," said Kareem. "But when the marja'iyya see that the people are confused, they will drop a hint about whom to vote for. They will never enter directly. Unlike the Iranian clerics, the marja'iyya in Iraq do not need political leaders to be religious men."

¶4. (C) "The local religious people are going to have a lot of influence over who the people vote for," Kareem continued. "That is just how things are in Iraq." Asked if this would especially benefit Sadrists or Fadilah candidates, since their parties, along with the followers of Sistani, subsidize many mosques in Wasit, Kareem demurred. "The only way the Sadrists will exceed its current representation is if very few people vote," Kareem opined. Presented with the counter argument that Sadrists had swept local council elections in al Kut, al Hayy, Numaniyah, and Suwayrah, Kareem said these elections were poorly organized, attracted few voters, and were exactly the kind of contest that benefit the better organized Sadrists (and Communists).

¶5. (C) "Many countries enter into our elections, because they have their own interests, and because we are a weak country right now," Kareem said. PRT noted that the USG is providing aid focused on logistical matters and voter education. Kareem said that the USG should listen to what the majority of Iraqis want, and act accordingly. "For instance, let us say there is the head of the Communist Party in Wasit, and he is a good person. You should support him." Kareem would not be drawn out regarding the nature of the support he had in mind.

¶ 6. (C) Asked about reports from local PRT contacts, including Sadr Trend PC member Ahmed Hassan Ebrah (strictly protect), that ISCI is creating "shell" independent parties that would run mixed lists of party members and independents, Kareem said "All the parties are doing this, not just ISCI," adding that there has also been a move by parties to pull in independents. "There is no independent candidate who has what it takes to attract the voters' interest," Kareem said, suggesting that independents, presumably not including his own Independent Gathering, would have to be absorbed into the larger parties to be relevant.

¶ 7. (C) Comment: Hajji Kareem and his colleagues hit the electoral jackpot in 2005 in large part as a result of the endorsement of the marja'iyya, and they are likely hoping that lightning will strike twice. In previous meetings, Kareem said that List 221 was deliberately designed to be regionally diverse and supportable by religious authorities including the marja'iyya, and the structure of his Independent Gathering seems similarly designed with an eye to optimizing his chances of eliciting clerical support. Kareem's suggestion, however muted, that the USG consider involving itself in provincial elections represents a significant change in tone. In a meeting with the PRT in February he said, eyebrows arched, that he was aware the PRT had been meeting with individuals in the political sphere and cautioned against the USG becoming involved in Iraqi electoral politics. "If you support a candidate it will be obvious to everyone," he repeatedly cautioned the PRT. End Comment.

CROCKER